Late-night whispers

—"In a room full of people, I look for you

Would you avoid me or would you look for me too?."

sombr - 12 to 12

When they finally parted their lips, the frantic rhythm that had been pounding in Est's chest all weekend slowed to a gentle murmur.

He didn't step back. Instead, his hands—which were still near William's neck—moved instinctively. The loose collar of William's cotton shirt had slipped completely off his shoulder, revealing the fresh, black lines of the newly completed tattoo.

Est's fingertips felt incredibly soft against William's skin. He slowly traced the raised tattoo which hadn't yet healed with his fingers, a confirmation that the mysterious man who had embraced him so desperately in the darkness was really there, in that small, cozy apartment.

William shuddered slightly at the touch, but he didn't pull away.

"It's beautiful." Est whispered. He let his hand rest warmly against William's shoulder blade, feeling the slight heat radiating from the fresh ink.

William exhaled slowly, looking down at the floor for a moment before looking up again with that same sincere gaze. He gently took Est's hand and intertwined their fingers together.

"I got it finished for you," William admitted softly, gesturing toward the unmade bed visible through the gap in the bookshelf. “A few days before the rave. I needed... I needed to feel brave enough to be honest, even though I was too scared to say it out loud.”

Est followed without hesitation, their fingers still laced together as they moved deeper into the small apartment. They sat on the edge of the mattress, the old electric fan humming quietly in the background.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. They just sat there, shoulders touching, breathing the same air.

Then Est began to talk.

"When I was with him," Est began, his voice trembling slightly, "I thought love was about giving. So I gave. I let him take more and more of my time, my energy, my personal space. I gave everything to keep him in the spotlight, thinking that, in the end, he would turn around and take care of me. But he never did."

William listened intently, his thumb gently stroking the back of Est's hand.

Est looked down at their intertwined hands—the grip that had asked if he was okay, the grip that had actually cared.

"By the end of it, I was completely empty," Est whispered, a beautiful, sentimental ache blooming in his chest. "I was left entirely alone, sitting in a beautiful apartment with absolutely nothing left of myself. They never held me like I mattered. They just held me because it looked good for the cameras."

William's grip tightened, his eyes filled with a fierce kind of tenderness.

"That's why I was so terrified when I woke up alone in those twisted sheets," Est confessed, his voice breaking. "I thought I had finally found someone who just wanted me—not the famous model, not the billboard—and then you were gone. And I thought... I thought maybe I had imagined it. That maybe you regretted it."

William's breath hitched. The heavy fear that had coiled tightly in his chest—the fear that he was just a mistake—finally dissolved completely.

"Est," William said softly, turning to face him fully. "That's not love. That's not even close to love. And you deserved better."

Est's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "I know that now. Because when I was with you, even just for that one night, I felt it. I felt what it's supposed to feel like when someone actually cares."

William reached up, cupping Est's face with both hands. "You aren't stealing anything that belongs to my world, William," Est continued, his voice thick with emotion. "You're the only person who has ever tried to give something back."

William's forehead came to rest against Est's, their noses nearly touching.

"I'm so sorry I left that morning," William whispered. "I thought I was protecting you. I thought if I disappeared, you could just—move on. Forget it ever happened. I didn't realize I was making everything worse."

"You were protecting yourself, too," Est said gently. "I understand that now. We were both scared."

Sitting tightly on the edge of the mattress soon felt like too much distance, an unnecessary barrier for two hearts that had spent the entire week aching to be close.

Slowly, seamlessly, William shifted backward, guiding Est with him onto the narrow, unmade student bed. They tumbled gently onto the sheets, the faint, rhythmic hum of the old electric fan vibrating softly in the background as the rest of the world completely shrunk away.

"I spent the whole week feeling like I was losing my mind, lying in my room and staring at the ceiling," Est whispered, his voice dropping into a soft, sleepy confession that was meant only for William's ears. He reached up, his fingers sliding beneath the loose, fallen collar of William's shirt to rest against the warm, bare skin of his shoulder blade. "Every time you stepped near me on set, my heart would react before my brain could even process why. My body just knew you."

William let out a soft, breathy laugh against Est's hair, a genuine sound that made his entire frame relax. He rolled slightly onto his side, burying his face into the crook of Est's neck, inhaling the clean, familiar scent of him.

"You have no idea how hard it was to stand three feet away from you holding a diffuser and pretend I didn't know the exact rhythm of your breathing," William admitted softly, his voice thick with the raw emotion he had been suppressing all week. He pulled Est even closer, his grip turning overwhelming, passionate, and beautifully heavy—the exact reassuring touch Est had been desperately mourning. "I kept my eyes glued to the lighting monitors because if I looked at you directly, I was terrified everyone would see how desperately I wanted to hold you like this again."

The kiss they shared lying down together was entirely different from the first, deeper, slower, more deliberate. It was the kiss of two people who had finally stopped running, who had finally chosen to stay.

William let out a silent sigh against Est's lips, tangling his fingers in the nape of his tousled hair, holding him as if he never intended to let him disappear from his sheets again.

As they breathed the same air, Est's hand slid lower down William's back. His fingers began to trace, slowly and deliberately, the raised, still-unhealed tattoo. With each feather-light caress along the dark, fresh lines, a small electric shiver ran through William's skin, but he simply clung to Est even tighter.

"I love the way you look at the world through a lens," Est confessed, his voice barely above a whisper. "I want to be the thing you don't want to look away from."

William pulled back just enough to look at Est, his eyes shining with an emotion so raw it made Est's breath catch.

"You already are," William said simply. "You've been that thing since the moment I saw you."

The warmth of Est's words lingered in the still air of the tiny room, long after William's blush had finally faded. Sitting together on the edge of the unmade bed, sheltered behind the crammed bookshelf, the chaotic bustle of Bangkok seemed

miles away.

William was wearing only his pants; his T-shirt had long since been left behind on the bed. But as the morning sun rose higher, casting bright rectangles of light across the room, the reality of the upcoming workweek gently knocked at their door.

They both knew the rules. In the glittering world of haute couture, shadows had to remain invisible, and princes had to belong to everyone.

"We have a photo shoot tomorrow," William murmured softly, his thumb tracing a timid pattern on his own knee, suddenly very aware of the recent, still-unhealed tattoo that stretched across his back.

Est hugged him from behind, his arms tightening around William's waist as if he could physically hold back the impending tomorrow. "Let's not think about that for now." Est said, his warm breath brushing against the bare skin of William's shoulder blade.

For quite a while, neither of them spoke; they simply let the old fan fill the silent room, choosing to hide a little further behind the crowded bookshelf.

By Thursday morning, the studio had returned to its usual frenetic pace. The air conditioner hummed incessantly, in stark contrast to the stifling heat of Bangkok outside, while makeup artists hurried back and forth with their cases, and the rapid, mechanical sound of camera shutters filled the room.

But for Est, the sanctuary was no longer an illusion.

He sat on his usual stool, dressed in a sharp, structured designer suit that felt heavy against his skin. Yet, his pulse was perfectly steady.

When the director called for a lighting adjustment, a familiar, quiet figure stepped out of the background shadows, holding a massive white diffuser just three feet away.

William looked completely professional, his face carefully blank, his eyes fixed on the angle of the light. To anyone else, he was just a freelance assistant fading into the wallpaper.

But Est knew the truth. He knew the boy beneath the blank expression; he knew the exact texture of the unmade sheets they had tumbled onto, and he knew the scent of clean laundry and fresh ink that belonged to him.

As William stepped a fraction closer to check the depth of the shadows on Est's cheek, his shoulder brushed lightly against Est's. It was an incredibly fleeting, invisible touch, gone in a mere fraction of a second, completely unnoticed by the

stylists hovering nearby.

Yet, in that tiny, electric point of contact, the coldness of the entire studio seemed to melt. Under the blinding, unmerciful studio lights, Est tilted his head just enough to look, and there it was—the tiny, soft curve of a secret smile playing at the very corner of William's lips.

William wasn't avoiding him. Even with his eyes trained on the equipment, William's entire universe had narrowed down to the boy sitting on the stool. The secret wasn't hidden in the safety of the dark anymore. It was standing right here, brilliant and undeniable, directly in the light.

The company SUV felt like a quiet, pressurized capsule as the engine purred in the underground parking lot. Outside, the world was still moving, but inside, the air conditioning was a cool, steady hum. Est leaned his head back against the leather headrest, his body exhausted from the long hours under the studio lights, but his mind was still drifting back to that fleeting, electric brush of William's shoulder from earlier in the day.

At the wheel, his manager Dana was entirely engrossed in her phone, her fingers flying across the screen as she coordinated the next week's chaotic schedule.

The heavy click of the door handle broke the silence. When the SUV door swung open, Hong stepped inside, bringing a sudden wave of life into the quiet car. He carried a bag and was dressed in a oversized two-piece gray jumpsuit. Even after hours of his own separate photoshoot, Hong looked utterly radiant—his hair was perfectly styled to the last strand, and his makeup remained entirely flawless.

With a dramatic, exhausted sigh, Hong let himself sink heavily into the leather seat right next to Est. Without a single word of warning, he tilted his head and leaned his weight comfortably against Est's shoulder, letting out a long breath.

"Everything okay between you and William?" Hong asked quietly, his voice dropping into a soft, private tone so it wouldn't carry to the front seat. "You completely disappeared for two days."

Est didn't pull away from the familiar, comfortable weight of his friend. Instead, a content, genuine warmth bloomed in his chest, and a slight, soft smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

"We talked everything out," Est murmured. "It was... it was much easier than I thought it would be. Honestly, I thought William would have told you by now."

Hong shook his head gently against Est's shoulder, a faint chuckle vibrating in his chest. "William talks about that kind of thing with Lego," Hong said, rolling his eyes

playfully. "I guess he doesn't like someone like me making fun of his romances. He prefers someone sweet like Lego who just smiles and tells him to follow his dreams all the time."

Hong paused, shifting his weight slightly. He lifted his head off Est's shoulder and looked at him intently, his sharp eyes scanning Est's relaxed face before his gaze flicked forward toward Dana.

"It'll be difficult, you know. You and William," Hong said softly, the playful tone completely vanishing from his voice, replaced by a grounded, peer-like honesty. "William isn't a famous model like Kai. Are you actually going to say anything to the public if you two start a real relationship?"

Est froze. His breath caught tightly in his throat. He hadn't really thought about it. Caught up in the sudden, overwhelming wave of satisfaction and safety he had found in William's arms on that narrow student bed, he had completely forgotten about the heavy baggage that came with his own reality.

He had forgotten the rules of haute couture—the rule that said shadows had to remain invisible, and princes had to belong to everyone else. How could he protect a quiet student like William from the blinding, unmerciful glare of the cameras that had already emptied him out once before?

Seeing the sudden, panicked shadow cross Est's eyes, Hong instantly cut him off before Est could spiral into an answer.

"Ah, never mind. Don't answer that," Hong sighed, waving a perfectly manicured hand through the air as if he could physically brush the heavy thoughts away. "I hate that kind of serious stuff anyway. It gives me wrinkles. More importantly, are you taking a vacation for Songkran?"

The sudden mention of the festival caught Est off guard. He looked out the tinted window of the SUV, watching the distant lights of the Bangkok streets. April and the water festival of Songkran suddenly didn't feel so far away anymore.

"I haven't looked at the schedule yet," Est admitted quietly, his thoughts still lingering on the boy left behind in the studio upstairs. "But I think... I think I want to take a break this year. A real one."

Hong smiled softly, leaning back into the leather seats as Dana finally put the car into drive. "Good. You deserve a holiday where you can actually breathe," Hong murmured, looking out at the city. "And maybe this time, you won't have to spend it alone in an empty apartment."

April began with a heavy, suffocating warmth that settled over Bangkok, carrying

with it the unmistakable, electric anticipation of Songkran. The entire city was undergoing a transformation, streets slowly filling with vibrant decorations, vendors lining the sidewalks with plastic water guns, and people counting down the days until the traditional water festival could begin. But for the company, the holiday was just another highly profitable asset to exploit. Far removed from the quiet, familiar, and deeply traditional roots of the festival, they threw an exclusive pre-Songkran party that was, more than anything, a manufactured stage to take photos and make money.

The venue was packed with neon-colored water guns stacked as pristine props, flashy themed decorations designed specifically for social media backgrounds, and tiny, aesthetic drinks that looked beautiful but tasted hollow.

Everywhere Est looked, flashing lights cut through the artificial haze, illuminating circles of actors, models, and internet influencers who stood scattered around the venue, entirely glued to their phone screens as they curated their public lives.

In the middle of all this superficial chaos, Est tried his best to follow the festive theme, but he felt completely out of place. The thin, wet-look white and blue button-up shirt he had been styled in clung far too tightly to his frame, and the simple white tank top he wore underneath did practically nothing to protect him from the freezing chill of the venue's massive air conditioning units.

"Déjà vu," Hong's voice suddenly pulled him straight out of his thoughts.

Est turned his head to see Hong stepping up beside him. He was dressed in baggy, ripped denim jeans and the exact same thin tank top as Est. Through the loose fabric, Est could faintly see the smooth skin of his stomach and the intricate, dark lines of the flower tattoo etched onto his waist. Every single time Est looked at that tattoo lately, it felt as though the ink seemed to grow larger.

"It really feels like a repeat of that night." Est murmured softly, his eyes scanning the crowded warehouse.

"Except this time, there's no dragon decoration on the ceiling." Hong replied smoothly, his tone low and private as he gave Est a knowing look.

Est didn't answer, because his gaze had already drifted past the shouting influencers and the laughing groups of elite guests. Standing near the edge of the VIP section, half-hidden behind a massive lighting rig, was William. He had a laminated staff badge hanging around his neck and was lifting a heavy camera to his eye, quietly taking photos of the event.

Even in a room packed with the most striking faces in the country, Est's eyes instinctively found the boy who had held him on a narrow, unmade bed.

As if feeling the weight of the look, William lowered his lens just a fraction. Across

the crowded, noisy room, his dark eyes locked directly onto Est's. He didn't wave, and he didn't move toward him, but the tight, professional mask on William's face softened into that tiny, familiar curve of a secret smile.

"I really just want to smoke and eat something real," Hong told him, letting out a long, loud sigh that broke Est's trance. He crossed his arms over his chest, leaning his weight back as he glared toward the main stage where an executive was droning into a microphone. "As soon as they finish this damn speech and the cameras turn off, I'm out of here. I can't survive on these tiny appetizers."

Est let out a soft laugh, tearing his eyes away from William for just a moment to look at his friend. "Where are you going to go?"

"Anywhere that sells actual rice and doesn't require an Instagram tag," Hong grumbled, though a small smile tugged at his lips. He flicked his eyes back toward the lighting rig where William was adjusting a lens, then nudged Est's elbow playfully. "And if I play my cards right, I'll take Lego with me. Which means you'll have a perfect excuse to disappear into the shadows with your photographer."

As the party moved forward, the heavy electronic bass continued to thrum through the floorboards, but the distance between the prince and his shadow began to shrink.

Quietly navigating through the sea of influencers who were completely glued to their phones, William approached them with his heavy camera hanging around his neck and his staff badge visibly resting against his chest.

Seeing him arrive, Hong let out a soft, knowing chuckle. He stood up straight, striking a brief, effortlessly dramatic pose to let William snap a few quick, professional photos for the company's records. As soon as the shutter clicked, Hong stepped away, offering a playful wink to Est before gently patting William on the back.

"I'm going to go find Lego." Hong murmured over the music, giving them a small, supportive smile before disappearing entirely into the crowded warehouse.

Left alone in the middle of the flashing lights, Est shifted his weight, his eyes locking onto William.

"You're doing it again." Est said softly, his voice barely carrying over the loud DJ set, but pitched perfectly for William's ears.

William stopped adjusting his lens, his hands freezing on the camera body. "Doing what?"

"Trying to blend in with the crowd," Est replied, a faint, deeply sentimental smile playing on his lips. He took a half-step closer, letting his eyes trace the tired lines

around William's face. "You've spent the whole night making sure no one looked at you, while you've spent the whole night looking at everyone else through that glass. You're exhausted, too. I can see it."

William finally lowered the camera completely, his dark brown eyes tenderly scrutinizing Est's pale, tired face. The thin white and blue shirt was still clinging tightly to Est's frame under the cold air conditioning, making him look incredibly fragile despite his status as a famous model.

"I'm just a photographer today, Est," William admitted gently, his voice rough and laced with that devastating sincerity Est had fallen for. "I'm supposed to be behind the lens, hiding in plain sight. You're the one everyone in this room is supposed to be looking at. Having all those eyes on you… that has to be so much harder."

As William looked him directly in the eyes, the chaotic bustle, the neon water guns, and the flashing strobe lights seemed to entirely disappear behind them, leaving them completely alone inside their own quiet sanctuary.

Est leaned in slightly, his voice dropping into a soft, private murmur. "Until what time do you work?"

Hearing the question, the rigid, professional mask William wore all night completely dissolved, and a genuine, beautifully warm smile broke across his face.

"Midnight." William told him softly, his eyes shining as he looked at the boy who wanted to be seen by him and him alone.

Est glanced at his own phone screen, noting the time, before looking back up with a lazy, affectionate curve to his lips.

"I can hold out for another thirty minutes, Cinderella." Est teased softly, his chest blooming with a beautiful, sentimental ache.

William let out a soft, breathy laugh. Instead of answering with words, he raised the heavy camera to his eye one last time. The shutter clicked—a single, quiet confirmation of their secret language. William offered one last lingering gaze, then turned and quietly melted back into the background of the venue.

Est watched his shadow fade into the crowd, Surrounded by influencers who were entirely detached from reality, Est smiled to himself, tonight, standing in the middle of a room full of people, forty minutes was absolutely nothing when he knew exactly who was waiting for him at the end of the countdown.

"Where do you want to go?" William asks.

"Anywhere that isn't a stage," Est replies. "Somewhere we can just be us."